



Teaching Undergraduate Psychology Majors about Dog Training Opens Doors for their Future

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Editorial

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Abbreviation: ASPCA: American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Editorial

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to the world both for humans and pets. The uncertainty and social isolation led twenty percent of American households to adopt a pet, and the ASPCA [1] has released new data suggesting that 90 percent of the dogs adopted during that time are still in their homes. As the crisis improved, the impact of the isolation and subsequent return to work resulted in dogs whose limited socialization experiences and inexperience with being left alone became apparent, and more owners began reporting behavioral problems, especially separation anxiety [2].

With this increase in pet ownership as well as the increased perception of behavioral problems in pet dogs, the need for dog trainers has risen. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the Job Outlook, 2019-2029, for Animal Care and Service Workers is 29% (much faster than average) and 27% for self-employed animal trainers. Bachelor's level psychology graduates, provided with training in animal psychology and applied learning theory, are well-positioned to fill these jobs.

According to research conducted by the American Psychological Association [3], fifty-six percent of individuals who earned a bachelor's degree in psychology did not go on to complete a graduate degree. One study found that 1,509,200 individuals who had a bachelor's degree in psychology were

part of the workforce [4]. The occupations of psychology degree holders represented 88 different occupation categories. For those who are interested in working with animals, a psychology degree offers an opportunity to use the knowledge gained from coursework in consumer behavior, comparative psychology, and applied learning theory to begin fulfilling careers in animal care services such as animal trainer.

Baccalaureate holders possess the understanding of animal psychology as well as human psychology necessary to successfully become a dog trainer. The APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major: Version 2.0 calls for baccalaureate students to have a wide range of knowledge in psychology that is ethically applied. Specifically, Goal 1.1C calls for students to be able to "analyze the variability and continuity of behavior and mental processes within and across animal species" (p: 20), and 1.3C indicates successful baccalaureate graduates will "propose and justify appropriate psychology-based interventions in applied settings". Research suggests that the use of positive reinforcement which focuses on timing and rewards in training is a more effective training method than the use of aversive or balanced methods [5,6]. These principles align with the American Psychological Associations Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major [7] and educating students in applied learning theory is a staple in the undergraduate curriculum. Combined with the goals of Critical Thinking, Communication, and Professionalism, these skills will enable bachelor's level graduates to apply the knowledge gained during their undergraduate career to fill the openings for animal trainers which are expected.

Not only do animal training careers provide viable options for baccalaureate graduates, but they are also beneficial to

our canine companions. The APA guidelines [8] also align with the Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare described by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) as freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury, or disease, freedom to express normal behavior, and freedom from fear and distress. Hawes, et al. [9] found that the most common reasons that dogs are returned to shelters after adoption are behavioral problems including aggression toward animals or humans, destructive tendencies, and separation anxiety. Dog trainers commonly address behavioral problems such as aggression, reactivity, separation anxiety, destructiveness, socialization, housetraining, and jumping on people. A deeper understanding of comparative psychology in areas of sensation, perception, cognition, and learning will provide long-term benefits for dogs' ability to live an enriching life in a long-term home [10,11].

Providing the educational background necessary to become a successful dog trainer upon completion of the baccalaureate degree in psychology is also good for institutions of higher education as it can provide students who may not strive for graduate education to fulfill their desire to help people and animals. This is valuable in the recruitment of students, expanding opportunities for student practicum experiences, and addressing the needs of a growing population of emotional support animals found on campuses. With potentially minimal curricular changes, institutes of higher learning can offer baccalaureate candidates in psychology the tools necessary to develop successful careers in a field that helps both companion animals and their human caretakers.

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